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THREE EXAMPLES OF MOTIVATION

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The subject at hand—the motivation of literature and composition in the high school—is indeed a vital topic, a part of the vision to all teachers of English. I shall not attempt to theorize. I could not if I would. I shall not quote from Wilson and Wilson, or from the valuable discussions of other writers on the subject, but using as a guide six terse words from Webster—"Motivation is to provide with a motive, to induce, to incite"—I shall proceed to tell you of three instances in which, perhaps, some impetus was given to the English work of the classroom because of the motive behind it.

The first was an experiment carried out in a fourth-year literature class. We were to spend a few weeks on the study of poetry. Would it be Chaucer and Milton, or could we sacrifice the quaint diction and the beauty of the one, the sublimity of thought and the grand purpose of the other, for some of the poetry of today? We did not have time for both. It was "Choose ye this day which ye shall read." So the problem really became, Which is the more vital now? Which will interpret life and living? Which will better help these boys and girls to find themselves, to do their part and take their place in this wonderful, restless, heaving age, the old or the new?

I worked out a tentative plan of procedure, presented it to my principal, who gave a most ready assent, adding in her individual way, "Go ahead, I'd like to see it done," and the die was cast.

The question at once loomed before me, Where are we to get our material? It was the same problem of the inadequacy of the small-town¹ library, with the additional difficulty that all the poets

¹ The work described in this paper was conducted in ———, a town of 7,000, before Miss McKee moved to Des Moines.

chosen were those of today, and everyone knows the embarrassment that often accompanies the attempt to secure definite information concerning famous persons "still in the flesh."

Undaunted, we set to work. Several weeks before the actual study began, I made a list of twenty or twenty-five poets—including Rupert Brooke, Alan Seeger, Joyce Kilmer, Lady Gregory, Masfield, Kipling, Alfred Noyes, D'Annunzio, and others. This list was read to the class, a copy was posted in the English room, and another was later given to the city librarian. The period was given over to a general explanation of the proposed plan and a discussion of the authors.

Everyone was to collect material—must furnish something if our venture was to prove a success. It was really surprising how soon our store of knowledge grew. They brought pictures and poems, clippings from Sunday papers, and listed all articles in magazines so they would be accessible when needed. Many of our best articles came from magazines in the hands of pupils, for the file in the city library was not unlimited. Our city librarian co-operated most heartily, bought some books especially for us, and secured others for our use.

The entire class worked in this manner for several weeks, collecting "any ideas on any author." Then came the clearing house and exchange of collections. Articles, references, poems, clippings, and plays were catalogued according to author and we were ready to proceed.

To each pupil was given a definite assignment—one particular author for special study and report to the class. The report consisted of: (1) a brief sketch of the author, (2) a review of some poems or play read, (3) the reading or reciting of some choice lines or thoughts selected from their reading. (This list was insisted upon, and it was a very definite part of the report that each pupil should read or give to the class the passages which had especially appealed to him.)

All the talks were first presented before the English class. Some were then given in other classes, and a few were delivered in the assembly. It so chanced that one of the literary clubs of the town at that very time was studying some of the poets whom we

had discussed and one girl—a very talented girl, the honor student of the class—was invited to give her talk before that club. This she modestly agreed to do, presenting it just as she had done in our classroom a few days before.

I feel it is not vaunting to say that the results of this study were most gratifying. The pupils had learned much of the beautiful in present-day poetry, and had enlarged their circle of acquaintance with the poets. I might add that not the least valuable result was some of the notebooks that voluntarily grew out of this study. For several years I had been interested in present-day writers, and by filing poems, incidents, or biographies when I wished, I had compiled some little store which was used as a kind of source book or Baedeker by pupils and teacher. Gradually, I noticed some of the pupils were making their own collection in a similar way—an act which was, of course, encouraged.

However, this did not compare with the taste acquired for better reading. We knew nautical life, we understood and interpreted our own boys in the navy better after we read *Salt Water Poems and Ballads*. To us the Dauber became the boy of eighteen, who dreamed, who suffered to achieve, but who, perhaps, died with his dream unfulfilled, grasping only the lesson that there are even greater things for the soul than the realization of our fondest dreams. The dying words of the Dauber, "It will go on," found expression in every gold star on our service flags. And so, in reading contemporary literature, we were interpreting contemporary life, from which we drew inspiration and helpfulness to build into manhood.

A second experiment afforded some stimulus to the work in oral composition. We had finished reading Washington's "Farewell Address" and "The Bunker Hill Oration." The discussion turned from the commemorative oration to the occasional address, and we determined to try our hand in that field, first pluming our feathers for this flight.

In our classroom we held proper ceremonies over the new post-office then in process of construction. We also laid the corner stone and dedicated the King's Daughters Hospital, which now stands as a monument to one of the most enthusiastic chapters of that

entire organization. We presented to and accepted in behalf of the high school a brick gateway, the gift of the outgoing Senior class. We even sent a delegate to the Lincoln Highway Commission, asking that they consider the road through our town as a feasible route through that section of the state.

On another occasion in our efforts in oral English the pupils (about forty-five in number) were divided into three groups. Some of the boys were organized into a commercial club, the girls into a woman's club, and the third—a much smaller group—furnished a banquet. Both clubs were organized, each having its president who presided over the class and its discussions. The topics considered by the boys were those their fathers and brothers were then debating, e.g., to a country boy was given the subject, "Why Should the Farmer Belong to the Commercial Club?"—a very real subject at that time, for the senior Commercial Club was then conducting a lively, systematic campaign to enlist all the enterprising farmers of the community in the Chamber of Commerce.

The girls held a union meeting of the clubs of the town. After the address of welcome by the president, one member presented the question of opening a reading room for visiting soldiers. Another showed the advisability of securing and furnishing two rooms to be used as ladies' rest rooms. A daughter of Ceres told what the club means to the modern country woman. They outlined the plan of work for the coming year, and the recitation closed with an informal discussion of the questions by all the members present.

We closed that series of lessons with a banquet—of toasts. This exercise just preceded the Junior-Senior banquet, and discovered to us some available material for that occasion, besides giving the participants helpful training before their formal appearance. The programs for these lessons were made out some time in advance, and were typewritten by some of the members of the class, who were glad to do it for practice work.

Just the other day I came across one of these programs and I found that our toast subjects included the different parts of a shoe: "The Sole," "The Tongue," "The String," "The Eyes," and for the closing number "The Last." At this banquet we had the toasts,

the good fellowship, in fact, everything pertaining unto a banquet, except the "food."

During this time every member of the classes had taken some part on one of the programs. He had been enlisted in some phase of the community interest, and so had brought community and school together. We had worked in the spirit of the community, so much so that a number of friends and parents came to visit our class the day the son called to order the Bureau of Commerce, or the daughter presided over the federated clubs of the city.

It is perhaps unnecessary to suggest some of the opportunities such a course afforded: (1) it gave occasion for drill in enunciation and pronunciation; (2) it showed the necessity of a usable, working vocabulary; (3) there was real value in having to stand before an audience with poise, and to "think on one's feet"; (4) there was a chance for parliamentary drill; (5) but most of all we became interested in the problems of life of our little town and we found that our daily tasks in the schoolroom were *not a preparation* but were already a *real part* of the community life.

Our plan for written composition accompanied the study of *Macbeth*, and took the form of a printed and illustrated publication. This particular magazine was *The Shakesperian Review*, rather an imposing title, I admit, to give to a periodical so little known in the literary world, but from fifteen or twenty names submitted by the pupils this was the name chosen. Each member had some part in the construction and compilation of this remarkable *Review*, though an editor was selected to whom all correspondence was directed.

I have kept one of the original copies, almost an autograph copy to me, and as I turn to the Table of Contents I see: (1) a dedicatory note—more properly a foreword—by the editor, (2) an editorial on Shakespeare's witches, (3) a paraphrase of the famous soliloquies, (4) Lady Macbeth as a hostess, (5) history of the Stone of Scone, (6) favorite quotations from members of the class, (7) a diagram giving the outline of the action of the play, (8) map of the Scotland of Macbeth, (9) illustrations of William Shakespeare, Anne Hathaway Cottage, and Stratford-on-Avon.

All the articles were written, handed to the editor, by whom they were criticized, and then passed to the English teacher, who made suggestions and corrections. All were revised and re-written before they were returned to the editor for publication. This printing was also done in the commercial department for practice work.

The pupils became intensely interested in the initial publication of such an unusual periodical, and though the circulation was always limited they felt they had contributed something of merit to the literary world. We really just read *Macbeth* and accompanied the study with a theme, but the pupils were writing for a reading public. They, too, like Mary Antin, may have dreamed of finding their names some day in the Cyclopaedia—when they, like her, had written and become famous, but however that may be, it all served as a stimulus to the work at hand.

In speaking of these plans I am not claiming any remarkable originality though I had never heard of their use up to that time. They did not eliminate theme correction or conferences, but they did infuse a new spirit into both. We were preparing our themes and talks for a definite time and a specific purpose. They were to be given to a reading public and a real audience. We did, indeed, attempt to make them interesting and genuinely helpful. It took much planning, tact, and work. The problems of composition, oral and written, had not been solved, and I am sure many improvements could be made; but it had given an incentive to the work, and I believe results justified the experiment. It added enthusiasm to the classroom, gave zest and spirit to oral composition, and made the routine of theme correction less burdensome. The magazine was really a source of pride. Though it did not diminish the work, neither did it diminish the joy of working. For after all, the happiness in the spirit of our task is our greatest reward.

Such then were the very simple methods used to vitalize the recitations in our classroom; to animate our daily work lest it become a weariness to the flesh, always keeping in mind a *specific purpose* and the *using of ideas* in living as the real motive underlying all English composition.